Supplementum
Byzantine Thirteenth Century Day Wrap-up, 13 May 2014

Annika Asp-Talwar (PhD Candidate in Byzantine Studies)
Jeff Brubaker (PhD Candidate in Byzantine Studies)
Matthew Kinloch (MRes Student in Byzantine Studies)
Wei-sheng Lin (PhD Candidate in Byzantine Studies)

Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies
University of Birmingham

The Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies is fortunate to host a multitude of scholars and students who specialize in various periods of Byzantine history and frequently cooperate with one another to further their research, but those who study the thirteenth century are particularly collaborative. On 13 May 2014 four postgraduate students – Matthew Kinloch, Jeff Brubaker, Annika Asp-Talwar and Wei-sheng Lin, who all worked under the supervision of Dr. Ruth Macrides – gathered to discuss aspects of their own research, as well as challenges relevant to the study of Byzantium in the thirteenth century.

The day-long workshop came about as the collective result of the four students’ interests and frustration. Each was astonished by the fact that, even though they all studied approximately the same period, they lacked a great deal of familiarity with the subjects the others were pursuing. Matthew Kinloch focuses on the problems of political agency following the Fourth Crusade – questioning how success and failure have been measured in the multitude of polities that formed after the fall of Constantinople in 1204. Jeff Brubaker studies the evolving diplomacy of the period between Byzantine and Latin rulers. Following in the proud tradition at Birmingham, Annika Asp-Talwar aims to explain developments in Trebizond and its changing relationship with Constantinople in the late thirteenth century and beyond. And Wei-sheng Lin grapples with the difficult questions facing the Anatolian economy in the uncertain and politically turbulent period of the thirteenth century. The group decided that the best solution to learn more about each other’s focus was with a day of collaboration – presenting their research to one another in the hopes of finding new answers as well as questions.

Preparations and arrangements pursued by Matthew Kinloch allowed the event to go smoothly. The group was also fortunate that Dr. Ruth Macrides, who supervises each of the four students, agreed to chair the event. Dr. Macrides’ work on Byzantium in the thirteenth
century – especially her translation and commentary of the history of George Akropolites – makes her keenly qualified to discuss the events and problems in studying the period. The students also benefited from the input and participation of Dr. Archibald Dunn, who offered a unique and challenging perspective on the issues. The programme put forward by Matthew Kinloch allowed each student ample time to present their research, followed by a stimulating but relaxed discussion.

Several questions and themes appeared and reappeared through the various presentations, echoing the problems one faces when attempting to discuss historical trends in general and Byzantine Studies on the thirteenth century in particular. What terms should historians use to name rulers and states? Is the period of the thirteenth century overburdened with a narrative of decline? How does one quantify and qualify the relationships between states? Through a lively series of discussions, along with a generous helping of debate, the group of students and professors were able to more succinctly identify the goals of their work and the challenges they face. The event embodies the ethos of the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies – supporting the cross-fertilization of subjects and promoting a scholarly environment.